

The Broken Cell

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Summary: Doctor Catherine Halsey, confined on the flagship of Jul 'Mdama's fleet, learns to live with her new situation. But when an opportunity presents itself, she makes a crucial choice- setting a battle in motion and changing her fate.

The Broken Cell

PROLOGUE

****Doctor Catherine Halsey**** was running in a field of green grass, and the sun was shining high above her eyes. She swung her hands up and down, and shouted with all the energy she ever had- young again. She was so very happy, so very free. But amidst the pastoral hills, an unsettling sound broke through the silence- the sound of a crying child. The world seemed to shrink and darken around her, and the smile had wiped from her face. The crying disturbed her in a level she could not understand, as if another deeper emotion was involved. She finally found the child on his knees, with his back to her- a boy no older than six.

She approached him slowly, with much hesitation, and stood behind him. She waited for a few seconds before calling him. "Why are you crying, little boy?" she asked, determined to sooth him. He did not answer, and his crying didn't stop. She put a hand on his shoulder lightly. "Are you okay? Are you lost?" she asked, caressing his soft back. Suddenly, he turned to her and revealed a head without a face.

"Why did you do this to me?!" he shouted, and his sad cries turned into angered screams. "Why did you take my face?" He grabbed her by the arm with an iron grip, squeezing so hard she felt her bones crack and shatter. She looked at her arm, surprised, and saw that all her skin around it turned old, gray and wrinkled- as if his very touch was aging her, bringing her closer to her inevitable death. "WHY DID YOU TAKE MY FACE?!" he said, in a deep voice (a voice like she only

knew in one man), and her hand snapped.

****CHAPTER 1****

She woke up feeling intense pain. It was her arm- her left arm. It was burning and shattering and twitching all at once- but it did none of those things. She didn't have a left arm, not for a few weeks. Like so many things, it was taken from her, and only a phantom remained.

She laid on a flat metallic bed, purple like the rest of her cell. Her back hurt more than she could ever imagine, the night's sleep on the hard bed left its toll. Lit by a weak blue light, the room wasn't much bigger than the bed itself (as if it had been designed to hold just enough room for the bed and a door). The cell door loomed to her right: large, automatic and made of thick, unpenetrable metal. It seemed like a solid block of steel that would never let anyone in or out, and the only signs of the world beyond were the dim, hollow voices of her two guards in their conversations.

"That's true, but I don't understand why we need to put two guards on her at all times. It makes no sense." Var's voice, she guessed. Halsey only had basic knowledge of the Sangheili language, but being held in the company of Elites helped her sharpen it. She could now understand whole sentences, especially those of her two guards- Var and Zek, two Sangheili SpecOps that were charged with making sure she doesn't leave her cell, and that no-one else comes in.

"I know. It's just a small, old human with no armor or weapons, with only one hand and on top of it all- a female." Zek said. His words didn't hurt Halsey, she knew they were all true and yet, they meant nothing. "She could do no harm to anyone, even if she tried."

"Well, I'm going to take a piss. Be careful of the nishum." Var said, laughing. Zek grunted in response.

It was only then that Halsey realized how hungry she was. She stood up from her bed, and walked to the door. "Zek." Halsey called, pressing her cheek to the door. "You hungry?" she asked, crafting a grammatically flawed sentence in Sangheili. He did not answer, but Halsey knew she heard. "I think it's time for breakfast."

****CHAPTER 2****

He would not let her leave until Var returned. Having only just relieved himself, Var was eager to go to the mess hall and get some food. They escorted her- Var from the left and Zek from the right, Energy Swords ready in their arms should an incident occur. The walk to the mess hall was long, but even so she was always happy to see anything other than the suffocating purple walls of her cell. She had asked Jul specifically to allow her to eat in the mess hall, saying it would save him the effort of sending a courier to bring her her food, and stating that she needs the walk in order to stay healthy. To her surprise, Jul didn't seem to care. That day was the seventh time she had ever left her cell, the six other times being for mundane check-ups, debriefs and interrogations held by the Shipmaster himself. He was surprised to see how eager she was to help him, how much secrets she revealed- he never had to harm her to let the truth come out.

Halsey would not bleed any more for the UNSC, let alone ONI.

The mess hall was separated from their corridor by a large, round, automatic door that split and opened in three directions when they approached. Inside, was a large room where she saw a number of Elites, Grunts and Jackals- all sitting down on long bench-tables. The Sangheili, who were higher in rank, sat in their own table, alone, while the Unggoy and Kig-Yar sat on a smaller table at the side. When she entered, her guards at her sides, all eyes turned to her. There was silence for a moment, and Halsey answered that silence with a blank stare before barging in and heading for the food stands.

She knew they were all still looking at her, but she couldn't care less. At the back of the room, one Kig Yar male stood behind what could only be described as a bar- like a High School lunch lady. There, he was cooking all kinds of meals- not one of which did not seem absolutely repulsive to Halsey. There was a green, bubbling soup which looked more like boiled vomit, there was a mushy brown sludge, a herb that looked a lot like grass but had little hairs sticking out, a dish that resembled rice but was red in color (called irukan) and finally a charred chunk of gray meat. At her arrival, the Kig-Yar approached the counter and screeched at her, pointing at a stack of plates to Halsey's left.

Halsey approached the stack, and was faced with a challenge. Picking up the plate was harder than Halsey could imagine, having lost her left arm, but she succeeded in pulling it up and let it lean on the side of her stomach so it won't fall down. The Kig Yar stared at her, as if waiting to see which foods she'd pick. Halsey pointed at the rice and at the meat (which were the only alien foods she could properly digest), and the Kig Yar answered by laying a fat pile of irukan on her plate which nearly knocked it out of her grip. On top of the red rice, she placed a small piece of the alien steak and went to the pile of silverware (of which there was only one type- a large tool, built for Sangheili, which was used as both a knife and a fork). The Jackal picked up one of the knives and stared at Halsey, at her severed arm, only to pick up another one. Laughing, she handed Halsey two knives. It was clearly mockery, as Halsey could never use two of these knives at once.

She heard the aliens around her begin to chuckle and laugh, even her guards- she was like a zoo animal, being abused by the aliens for their entertainment. Halsey did not give the Jackal the pleasure of an angered face and instead, turned to look for a seat. The only place left with room which was not near Sangheili officers was near an outcast Grunt, clearly not loved by his fellow shipmates. When Halsey came to sit at his table, he stood up and walked away, leaving her alone at the edge of the table. They were all still looking at her, but she sat down on the bench and placed the plate on the table steadily. She gripped one of the fork-knives with her right hand and jabbed it lightly at the red rice, trying to spoon some of it into her mouth. It tasted dreadful, like little balls made of dry dead bugs, but she would not spit it out. This was all she could eat, and she wouldn't want to keep her watchers entertained.

After she swallowed another handful of rice, she looked at the thick chunk of roasted flesh, losing her appetite. She tried cutting the meat with one knife, but quickly remembered that with no fork (and no left hand) to hold it down, the food would be very hard to cut. She

pulled the knife out and tried slowly slicing the meat along its side. The plate rattled and moved from left to right, with the movements of her arm, and the meat didn't budge. She tried stabbing it at its center, delivering persistent thrusts that yielded no success. Quickly, she found herself stabbing at the meat, taking all her anger out on the cheap alien meal. After one final stab, she let the knife sink deep into the meat and left it standing. The room around her boomed with laughter. She would have lied if she said she didn't care.

It was a few minutes later, when the metallic taste of the crunchy red rice left her mouth dry, that a young Elite SpecOps Commander, Jul's second in command (replacing Gek, his predecessor) came to her rescue. "Human, the Fleetmaster says he needs you." he said. His name was Theema'a which sounded like a female name to Halsey, not that she would ever say that to his face. "There is... an issue. In the hangar bay. We received a new shipment. An extremely _rare _shipment."

"Show me the way, Commander." Halsey said, standing up from the bench and examining the room. She may have been like a zoo animal to them, but their Fleetmaster still found her infinitely more valuable. The smug looks were gone from their alien faces, and they knew who was really the laughing stock. Halsey followed Theema'a out of the dining hall with her head held high.

It was a few hours later, when all the crew finished their breakfast, that a dozen Unggoy were sent to clean the dining tables. Where Halsey sat, they found a plate on top of which lay an untouched yet violently scarred chunk of gray meat, in which a knife was embedded. The Unggoy searched around the table for a second knife, but it was nowhere to be found. At first, they were concerned- maybe the human took it, they thought- but soon enough they remembered she only had one arm and that she would never_ need_ a second knife.

****CHAPTER 3****

The way to the hangar was too long to walk on foot, especially since Jul 'Mdama was waiting. Halsey, her two guards- Var and Zek- and Theema'a made the trip on the antigrav train on the Assault Carrier's starboard. It was a small, purple shuttle that ran on its own small grid all around the carrier. Halsey used it before when she went to see Jul on the bridge. Halsey knew that, as a ranked individual, this particular Sangheili would have a translator device. That meant that for the first time in a week, Halsey could have a real conversation.

"So... What is this shipment and why do you need my help?" Halsey asked in English, finally breaking the ice.

"We bought it from the Kig-Yar. Those pirates charge big, but their products never fail to be tainted." the Sangheili said, clenching his four mandibles tight.

"What does that have to do with me?" Hasley asked.

"You presume too much, _human_. If you don't change your tone, you'll force us to put you in your place." he said, and the room fell silent. After a long minute, he resumed. "This is not a normal shipment. The Covenant hasn't seen one of these since the end of the

Great War, they all seemed to disappear. Where to- we don't know."

"And how, may I ask, did you get your hands on a Huragok?"

Theema'a was surprised at her correct guess. "The Kig Yar said they found the creature in an old Covenant mining facility, hovering around and fixing machinery. Without a single Unggoy, the Huragok still managed to keep the facility running. It seems he didn't hear the same call that the rest of them did." Theema'a said. "Why we need you, I don't know but I would never question my Shipmaster, let alone the Fleetmaster himself."

"Jul needs me because I can talk to it. I have a lot of experience with Engineers- together, we made the Infinity what it is today."

The hangar was huge. It seemed to hold hundreds of Phantoms, Spirits, Liches (capable of slipspace navigation) and Seraphs. Behind a blue shield that occupied the whole right wall of what was probably a kilometer long docking bay, lay the emptiness of space. But there was more than blackness in the space beyond- they were in a star system now, and rays of sunshine were flowing into the hangar from a small red sun outside. They walked for a minute before the small Kig Yar pirating ship came into view. It was brown and rusted at its sides, clearly old and well-used. Outside, behind the ship, were a group of Elites and two unarmored Jackals pulling on a long chain-linked rope. The rope went up into the ceiling, as if it was tied to a helium balloon, and in many ways- it was.

The Engineer was trying desperately to hide from the small crowd that cornered him, floating away between two docked ships and getting out of sight.. "Give me the rope!" Jul 'Mdama shouted at the Jackals in Sangheili. The growls, barks and reptilian hisses that were their responses were far beyond Halsey's translating abilities, so she could only guess they said "The money first."

"You will not get your money until that chain is in my hands." Jul said, and the Jackals pulled hard at the rope. From above, Halsey heard a screech of pain. The Jackal kept pulling until the Huragok was near eye level, shouting unintelligible hisses at the terrified animal. The Huragok waited there for a moment, and just as the Kig-Yar was about to hand Jul the leash, it started floating away again. The second Jackal then struck it with a long leather whip, and it squealed with pain, finally giving in. Jul took the creature by the leash and pulled it with force towards him. He turned to one of the other Elites in the room and gave them a signal. Two Elites came, holding a large block which was undoubtedly a UNSC slipspace drive and placed it in the trunk of the Kig-Yar ship. The two Jackals said something to Jul, turned around and went into their ship to prepare for their leave.

Jul turned to Halsey and stared at her. "It seems we've handled that situation without you."

Halsey approached the poor creature. There was one fresh whip mark on one of its purple sacks (slicing through its pink flesh), but there were many older whipmarks on its back that have begun to heal. "You shouldn't abuse this creature, or you it won't help you." Halsey said, stroking the creature. Jul grunted and gave her a stern look.

"You have to set him free, give him his space. You don't need to whip him to make him work- it's in their nature." The Engineer floated behind her, hiding from the Elites like a scared child.

"I know more about Huragok than you think, doctor." Jul said.

"But not as much as me. Do you even know what to _feed_ it?" Halsey said, as the creature began touching her with its blue tentacles. Suddenly, its blue glistening eyes found the stump of her amputated arm, and it flew fast to examine the wound. Halsey let it do what it wanted, and kept focus on the Shipmaster.

"You will speak to Rau. Tell him all he needs to know about this... thing. Make sure no important detail is missed- if there's trouble, you'll be the first to know." Jul said. Hardly a veiled threat.

"Of course, Shipmaster. Anything else?" she said, changing her tone.

"Yes. You will come to my quarters in an hour to examine the Key. You should hope our meeting yields satisfying results." Jul said, walking away, followed by Theema'a. Halsey turned to the Huragok, who had already untied the her shirt sleeve and observed the stump. Even with all her medical training, the tools that the Sangheili offered were pathetic at best and the only option was to amputate it before the infection had spread. They lived up to their name as a species too proud to have anything but basic medical care.

"Come." Halsey said to the Engineer, freeing it from its chain and taking one of its tentacles lightly.

****CHAPTER 4****

"The key is useless without it's second half." Halsey told him.

"Are you purposely trying to remind me of your betrayal? The key cannot be useless, there must be some information to glean for it." Jul replied.

"There is, Shipmaster. The Janos Key is a technological marvel: it stands here incomplete in a molecular level. It seems impossible, but who are we to try and understand the Forerunners. We can examine it all we like, we might even be able to understand how it works, but the true treasure is hidden away. We can only unlock it with the other half." Halsey said.

"And what treasures are these?" he asked her.

"I've already told you, I have no idea. The Librarian gave it to me and told me it holds important information, but that is all." Halsey lied. Jul 'Mdama would not learn the true power of the Janos Key from her: that it is a roadmap to all the Forerunner technology in the galaxy, that it has an even greater purpose- one that even Halsey couldn't understand. The "Absolute Record", whatever that might be... The Librarian gave the key to Halsey specifically, tasked _her_ to take it to the Absolute Record and do... what? _If Jul knew about this, nothing would stop him from hitting Humanity in full force. Nothing would stop him, and nothing would stand in his way- innocent blood would be spilled._

"And you are sure your human friends aren't doing any better with their half?" Jul asked.

"I am sure." Halsey said, and it wasn't a lie. "And they are not my friends. Friends don't often shoot one another."

"Why did they shoot you? Were they afraid you would tell me their secrets?" Jul asked.

"They were afraid of me, not my secrets. They have been looking for a good excuse to kill me for years now, since I became their prisoner." Halsey answered.

"You were a prisoner?" Jul asked, surprised.

"They blame everything on me, as if I had no partners in the crime. The very ones who gave the final word put me in custody. The ones that held the whip are the ones who judge me. The doctors who did what I told them to do... who injected the children with the very substances that killed thirty and changed the rest forever... They look at me now as a villain, as an enemy. I became their target, and whenever they scratched at their guilt it was me who took the blame. I was their scapegoat, and for five years I accepted that. I lived with their punishments, and at nights I was filled with regret. The guilt I felt- I feel- is a far greater torture than anything they could do to me. I deserved it- all of it. But they weren't done torturing me. Before I made contact with you, I was brought onto the UNSC Infinity for my Forerunner expertise, their doctor disappeared- you took him. It was there that I found out that 117... That Jon... Was alive and well. They let me rot with my guilt, they blamed me for everything they did, they locked me away- dead to the world- and they shot me, and I lost my arm. But the most painful punishment, the most unjust of them all, was how they lied. That they didn't tell me..." Anger filled her. Jon was the closest thing to a son she ever had. She knew him even better than Miranda, as sad as that truth was. And they let me think he was dead. Hid it from me. My Jon. My Spartans died and died and died and I grieved for them all as if they were my children. Don't I deserve that much- to know that he's alive?_ Halsey thought, angry._
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Jul did not answer, he simply stared at her, as if hit by a new light, his four rectangular jaws hanging open, revealing the insides of his mouth. "What did you do to those children?"

"I took their faces away... There were seventy five- presented from a large gene pool, across a dozen colonies. They were all perfect: smart, tall, quick, athletic and most of all- obedient. They were all between the ages of four and six when we took them from their families, their worlds, leaving behind unstable clones prone to die quicker than the blink of an eye. Flash clones like these had little time to develop a standard immune system, you see. But their parents didn't know that, they thought their children were hit with sudden, deadly diseases. It was better that way, better than letting the parents wonder all their lives where their children have disappeared. It was closure, and it allowed them to move on. The children were taken to a facility in Reach where they were molded with military training and indoctrination. When the time was right, we applied augmentations- bone density, muscle size, height, reaction time... Half died in the process, those that survived came closer and closer

to what we always wanted them to be- the perfect soldiers. The soldiers who held the fate of humanity in their arms. Spartans."

"Tales of Demons were heard as soon as the Great War began. You lie. You say you did it all to save the human race, but they did not need any saving! You are just another crazy, manipulating human, like the others." Jul mocked.

"Oh, but I knew. I knew all along, Jul. I did not know that I knew, but I always did. I was born to do this, to create Spartans. They were always the next step- the armor, the augments... They were all part of the plan. The Great War was always coming, Jul 'Mdama. We could not stop it, we can not stop it- we can only prepare, as I did. Who do you think_ I am?" she asked him.

"Who do you_ think_ you are?" Jul said, angrily.

"The Librarian spoke to me at Requiem. She knew my name- she knew _exactly_ who I was. Don't you see? The UNSC, the Covenant, the Didact... they are all part of a puzzle, a puzzle that the Librarian put together a hundred thousand years ago- and _we_ are at its center. We are the product of generations of planning, but we are all ruining it. You, the UNSC and their empty-headed leaders, the Prophets, the Didact... We are fighting eachother when we are meant to be preparing, uniting. We are stepping on the Mantle and shunning it aside when we are meant to reclaim it. Don't you understand a _thing_? The Great War is yet to come, and humanity is not your enemy. You are a fool, Jul 'Mdama."

"Shut your mouth or I will take your second hand." Jul shouted.

"No, you won't. You need me, just as much as I need you."

"You will do as I say, human. You are just as much of a prisoner here as you were with your own kind. You have no power here, and when you cease to be useful I will let the Kig-Yar throw you out of an airlock. Now, tell me. What _exactly_ did you do to the Demons? You mentioned augmentations? Describe them, in detail." he said, an idea forming in his head.

"You don't really mean..." but Jul only gave her a serious look. Halsey was surprised. The Sangheili who had just judged her as another evil human was asking for her recipe. "The human anatomy and the Sangheili anatomy are very different, Jul. The results could be disastrous."

"I want your notes ready by tomorrow, bring me a detailed list of the augmentations and the materials and machines you used to make your Spartans." he examined her expression with humor. "Take her away." he said to the guards at the door.

****CHAPTER 5****

Halsey was tired of being a slave to people who didn't understand her. To people who judged her, hypocrites who thought they were the white knights of their species when all they really did is continue a war that should have ended years ago. But for a while, Halsey gave in. She ate their terrible food, despite digestion problems. She drank their foul water and she did as they pleased. She gave Jul a

list of all the augmentations and substances and rough blueprints for the machinery needed to induce them. He seemed satisfied, and Halsey could only guess what he planned to do with it, shuddering at the thought.

She got to meet the Huragok again. He seemed happier than before, now that he had so much work to do and now that he was free from the clutches of the Kig-Yar pirates who whipped him senselessly. Jul had given him Halsey's notes about the Spartan's augmentations, and set him to working on a version more friendly to the Sangheili. "What's your name?" she asked the Engineer, using their sign language.

"_Glides Low_." he signed to her, with his many tentacles.

"Do you understand English?" she asked him in English, while signing.

"_Yes. I have learned many human tongues._" Glides Low said.

"Good."

That night, when they put her back in her cell, she laid back and thought for what seemed like hours. Where will she go from here? How long will she stay in Jul's clutches? How long before Jul finds no use in her? What will he do to her when that happens? No, she would leave this cell- one way or the other. She pulled herself up with her right arm, her left side burning with the phantom pain. Under her bed-sheets, she uncovered the knife tool she stole from the dining hall. It was huge- big enough that you could imagine knights using it in the middle ages. It was also very heavy, and very sharp.

All it would take was one light thrust towards the artery in her thigh. One small cut, and all the blood in her body will begin pouring out. The Elites would find her in the morning laying in a pool of her own blood- finally free. She could not slit her wrist, because she didn't have a wrist, so any other artery would do the job... But Halsey was stronger than that, and Halsey had a lot left to do in her life. The Librarian gave her a mission, and she had to see it through.

Halsey waited. An hour might have passed, or maybe even two, but sure enough the time came. "Zek, I need to take a piss." Var told him.

"You have a small bladder, Var." Zek told him.

"You know what they say about Sangheili with small bladders." Var joked.

"No, I really don't. Go take your piss, it seems to have gone up to your head." Zek told him. Halsey heard steps walking away from her. She now had about three minutes to act, and she'd have to time it perfectly if it was going to work out. She waited a few seconds, to not sound suspicious, and leaned against the large metal door. "Zek, may I have some water?"

"Wait a second." he told her, through the door. This routine took about twenty seconds, as there was a tap of fresh water right outside

the cell block. She heard Zek's heavy steps getting closer to her door, no doubt holding a cup of water. By her count, she would have less than two minutes to get it done, and two minutes to disappear before Var comes back. She took in a deep breath, and decided to stop thinking about it. _It must be done._

The door opened. "Here, human." Zek said, holding out an angular cup. The Storm Covenant had sloppy armor, which left a lot of their skin revealed and in the open. Inside the ships, they didn't even bother to turn on their energy shields. The large knife came down on him between two armor pieces and right into the neck. Halsey put all the strength her old bones and muscles had into the blow. It was surprisingly effective, as deep blue blood sprayed on her face and at the side wall.

"AAAAAAAH!" Zek grunted, dropping the cup of water, which shattered on the floor, and giving Halsey a strong punch. She flew backwards and fell on her hard bed. For a moment, she thought her plan was doomed: a huge mistake that would only set her back. She closed her eyes, expecting to hear Zek calling for help, but all she heard was a loud thud. When she opened her eyes, Zek was on the floor- the knife embedded deep in his throat and blood gushing out. She had to run now, Var was probably on his way back and if she were here when he'd return, he'd likely kill her.

Halsey fell to the ground on her knees and searched the newmade corpse. She found the Plasma Pistol on Zek's belt and picked it up. She looked at the open door and ran.

****CHAPTER 6****

****Jul 'Mdama**** was sitting in his office, examining the Janos key. There was something really weird about it, as if just holding it filled him up with energy. He wondered what secrets it could hold, and if they would be enough to destroy the humans. Halsey was naive if she truly thought the galaxy could get together and hold each other's arms after nearly thirty years of war. All Jul ever wanted was to bring back the Sangheili race to its former glory- to be at the top of the food chain again. Only the Prophets ever threatened them, and Jul would not have his race bowing down to mere humans.

If he had to pretend to be some religious messiah in order to get people to follow him, so be it. The truth was that Jul did not think of the Forerunners as gods, but merely more evolved beings. If the Sangheili assure their positions in the galaxy, they would one day grow to become just as great as the Forerunners, if not greater. But his men didn't want to hear that, and Jul respected it. He once used to have faith as well. Before the Prophets' betrayal.

"Fleetmaster, Var 'Ontomee is here to see you." his guards told him from outside the office.

"Not now, I am busy." Jul told them.

"Fleetmaster, it seems urgent." the guard said.

Jul sighed and stretched his jaws. "Let him in."

Var came inside the office and crashed to his knees. "Fleetmaster, the human has escaped."

"WHAT?!" Jul asked, awe struck.

"She killed Zek while I went to relieve myself, Fleetmaster. I am sorry." Var said.

Jul stood up and ran, pushing the pathetic excuse of a Sangheili out of his way. He reached the antigrav train and waited impatiently inside, with Var and his guards standing a safe distance away from him- they realized he was ready to kill someone. The doors slid open and Jul sprinted to the cell block. There was a commotion going on there, and Commander Theema'a was trying to settle it. "Move!" he shouted at a group of Unggoy and Kig-Yar that crowded up around Halsey's cell. When the little idiots saw that Jul was coming and saw the expression on his face, they ran off in an instant.

"Fleetmaster, this is a disgrace-" Theema'a began to say.

"Show me." Jul interrupted.

Two Sangheili feet were sticking out from the cell door, and a pool of blue blood was creeping out of it. Inside, the cell was spattered with blood and Zek was laying on the ground with a knife sticking out of him. Jul began to furiously kick the body and turned towards Var. "You two let an wrinkled human female get the best of you?! You pathetic little..." Theema'a stopped him.

"Fleetmaster, Var is not to blame." he said. Jul pushed him aside and gave Var a hard smack across the face that sent him falling backwards.

"Fleetmaster, forgive me." he said after standing up. "I found the body as it is. If I were here when it happened I would never have let her go. Her blood would pool beside Zek's, I swear."

"It is not her blood I want." Jul told him, now facing Theema'a. "Find her. Quickly. And place the ship on lockdown until you do. I will not have the human escape." Jul turned back to Var. "You, get me the Huragok. Now."

Var ran off quickly and Theema'a talked over the comms. Jul took the time to examine the corpse. It was a dinner knife that was stuck in Zek's throat, and Zek's Plasma Pistol was gone. Halsey must have been planning this for a while... That insolent nishum would regret this. When he found her, Jul would make her scream. Var arrived with the Huragok and said "Fleetmaster." bowing his head.

"Go now. Do something useful." Jul told him. "Find the human, but do not hurt her. If I hear anyone killed her you will take the punishment." Jul said.

"Yes, Fleetmaster." Var said, running off.

"Huragok. Clean this up." Jul said, and the creature floated to the corpse, quickly laying the body on the bed and using the bedsheets to wipe the blood, all simultaenously. "How is the project going?" Jul asked it as it finished up.

"_I will soon finish it. I have improved many aspects, but still fear

there is a small chance for survival. Right now, the figure is just of sixty one percent._" the Huragok said, in his new virtual voice. Jul had asked him to create a microphone and speak out loud, as no one on the ship but him and Halsey could understand their sign language._>

"That is good. You will finish it tomorrow, and we shall begin testing. If you see the old woman, if she approaches you, you will come to me and tell me where she is." Jul told the Huragok. The creature simply left room and headed back to its working station, which Jul took as a "yes". Jul walked out of the cell and saw Theema'a again. "Find her. Alive." he told him. Theema'a nodded, and Jul walked away.

****Glides Low was flying back to his den,**** where the Sangheili have left him to work on his many projects. He passed by the augmentation stand, filled with substances that could enhance the muscles, harden the bone and lead to enhanced growth (both mental and physical). He flew up in a gust of air and behind a large metal brace in the sealing. Hidden on top, was an automatic door which he had only just created from raw materials around the ship- and only he knew the code combination. Glides Low tapped the alien numbers quickly with the cilia on his tentacles and the door opened. Inside, sat Doctor Catherine Halsey, waiting.

****CHAPTER 7****

He held it up to her like a child presenting his newest drawing, except this was a far more impressive offering than any child could hope to give to their mother. _Should I put it for display on the fridge? _she wondered, smiling. "Thank you." she said. Halsey was surprised to see her vision clouded by tears- had she not been a prisoner in this ship, she would have built one herself long ago. But Jul 'Mdama would not have it- he thought having one arm would humble her, remind her that she was under his power. _Not anymore, _she thought as Glides Low inserted the robotic arm into her stump.

For a moment, it hurt- it burned like the fires of hell, sending shivers up her neck and down her spine. Her phantom arm tingled and shook, her bones clenched and her muscles froze. And then her body loosened, and she had an arm again. She looked at it with awe, happier than she could ever remember herself being. "_Is it working?!_" Glides Low asked excitedly, his programmed voice booming with artificial emotion.

"Yes." she answered, flexing her arm, testing it left and right, making a fist, moving her fingers one by one. _It works_.

"_Good! What shall we do next doctor Catherine Halsey?_" the Engineer asked, moving around the little closet-room and checking his monitors.

"Where is the Shipmaster?" Halsey asked.

"_Fleetmaster Jul 'Mdama is in his office. It seems they have placed a search on you all throughout the ship, but they haven't tried searching here yet. Perhaps on purpose._" the Engineer said as it fiddled with the monitor, switching between the many live cameras around the ship.

"Can you build a long-ranged communicator device?" she asked him. "I can give you the schematics, all you will need is the resources."

"_I can build it_." Glides Low said. "_Slipspace communicators were standard fare when the masters were alive. Who would you like to talk to?_"

Smart creature. Halsey thought. "An old friend. A new enemy."

****Far away, in another star system, a human ship floated in space.**** It was the largest ship the humans ever built, and the strongest. Inside, thousands of personnel ran from one wing to another, entering codes in their keyboards and preparing the ship for duty. The UNSC Infinity was a force to be reckoned with, and not just for its hardware- inside, there was an army of Spartans.

Captain Lasky received the call at the Infinity bridge, a call coming from an unidentified source on an unidentified vessel, deep in Covenant space. "Should we answer it?" he asked Palmer.

"Why not? It could be important." Palmer suggested, batting her hair from her eyes.

"Let's have it, then." Lasky said. He was surprised when Catherine Halsey's face appeared in his monitor, and with a prosthetic arm. Her face showed contempt, and that alone frightened the Captain, even in the most dangerous vessel humanity has ever built, with hundreds of Spartans around him.

****Jul 'Mdama was in his office****, examining the Janos Key. Its curves and turns glistened with the light of the plasma that lit the room, and the red hue in its center brought Jul to a reality far away. _The Forerunners- the greatest civilization to ever roam this galaxy, and yet they were not gods. None of us are, and none will be. Even if there is some force, some omnipresent power somewhere in the universe... I would never praise the god that took Raia from me. Sometimes, he felt like his whole life was a fraud- like he's gathered crazy fanatics around him only because they serve his ends. He believed none of it- when he saw the Didact, he didn't see a god, just another human. It troubled him, how similar that Forerunner was to his mortal enemy. Sometimes at night, before he went to sleep, he would find himself laughing. What if this was all for nothing? What if I am fighting the wrong enemy, like Halsey said?_

Thinking of Halsey made him mad again, and he found himself punching the table in his rage. The dirty human managed to hack the systems and deactivate the camera footage across the ship, and now she's hidden herself in some hole. The past few hours have only given him negative reports. Halsey wasn't in the cell block, Halsey wasn't around the bridge, Halsey wasn't in the mess hall or the hangar or near the core or the slipspace drive. She was nowhere to be found. The last place to look in was beside the Huragok. Jul had placed men all around it, waiting for Halsey to leave and reveal herself. In truth, he really hoped that the Huragok wasn't helping her- he had quite wanted a Huragok, and he'd paid a fair price for it. _It would be a shame to kill it before it managed to help us. Jul thought.

His machine was ready. Only half an hour ago, two Unggoy pushed it into his room. It was a large thing, made of solid purple metal- two spinning rings dotted with fluid injectors that would jab at a Sangheili body encased in the shell at its center (their casks filled with green and blue and yellow substances that Jul did not recognize). It would spin and turn and the process would be done within minutes. The pain wouldn't subside for days, but the strength would come immediately- a strength that even the Demons would dread to face. _Maybe I shall make my own Spartans, _he thought. But first the machine must be tested.

A Kig-Yar entered his office from behind him. "Fleetmaster, there is no trace of the human in the med bay." she said, in that quirky reptilian voice.

"Bring me Theema'a. I know where she must be." Jul said.

****CHAPTER 8****

****Theema'a**** was a regular Sangheili- not too tall, not too short, not too smart or too dumb. But he was loyal, and he was responsible. Those were the traits the Fleetmaster recognized in him. That was why he was promoted among many other worthy candidates. _I must not fail him,_ he thought.

They came in with a group of three, with two more Sangheili were stationed at each door around the Engineer's room. Their Plasma Rifles were raised- they were ready to kill. "Halsey will not escape this ship." the Fleetmaster told him. "I won't allow it. If she leaves, she leaves as a corpse." But the priority was to keep her alive. She could be useful, the Fleetmaster said. _How can a human ever be useful? All she must think of is ways to betray us. It's all just a trick, doesn't he see? She's playing him a fool._

"Where is the Huragok?" Theema'a asked his companions.

"He did not leave this room, Commander." one of them said. "We made sure of it."

"Commander, look here. Up." another said. Behind a large metal plate at the sealing was a hidden room, locked behind a spiral door.

"Open it." Theema'a said. "Quickly."

The first Sangheili started working at the panel next to the door, and within a few seconds the latch opened. They climbed inside with relative ease and the first thing they saw was the makeshift control room filled with monitors that showed the view of the whole ship. There was no sign of Halsey or the Huragok, but the little room extended behind a second spiral door into a series of supply tunnels that seemed to stretch all around the ship. _She could be anywhere. _Theema'a understood. It was then that he saw the little flashing red light on the floor. It was a black box connected to three small plasma batteries. The simplest bomb Theema'a had ever seen.

****Halsey**** pressed down on the trigger and the whole ship seemed to shudder. The monitor showed the little room crashing into itself and falling to the ground floor- metal flew everywhere, and hot plasma

smearred the wall, melting metal and shattering plate. The camera exploded into a thousand little pieces and their vision was gone. "_You should not have done that._" Glides Low said. He had refused to help her make the bomb before, but luckily for her she had known quite a bit about explosives. All the pieces were present, she only needed to put them together.

"But I did. Show me the way to the hangar." she said, clutching her Plasma Pistol with both her arms.

"_We must turn left. You should know, the Fleetmaster has placed the ship under lockdown, and no vessel will leave it until he finds you._" Glides Low said.

"If Jul hopes to survive he'll have to remove his lockdown. Without sending Seraphs and Liches to draw fire and lower the Infinity's shields, this ship would be destroyed in no-time." Halsey said. "They should be here soon, if all is well."

"_But they aren't here yet. Maybe we should wait._" Glides Low suggested. That gave Halsey an idea. _Should I leave this ship empty handed, or should I take my prize? The artifact was meant for me, the Lifeshaper gave it to me. She called me by name. _Halsey thought.

"You are right." she said. "Where the Fleetmaster's office?"

"_Isn't that dangerous?_" Glides Low asked.

"Not if he isn't there."

****Jul 'Mdama**** heard the explosion from his office. It was a big one, he knew instantly. He ran quickly and found himself at the Huragok's lab. He did not remember how he got there, it was all instinctual and it happened fast. _How much damage did she make?_ he wondered. At the door, two guards were rendered unconscious, laying on the floor. When he entered the lab, he found that two floors have crashed on top of eachother, leaving a gaping black hole in the sealing. There was smoke everywhere, and the smell of melting plastic was strong in the air. Beneath the rubble, he would find the bodies.

Jul began to remove the broken metal braces piece by piece, digging down and down under the mess. _Whose bodies will I find? _he wondered. Soon, a dozen others began helping him- Unggoy, Kig-Yar and Sangheili alike- digging and digging and digging. He did not recognize the first body- just another Sangheili, with his head smashed in by the force of a thousand tons of steel. He recognized the second one- the charred, broken remains of Commander Theema'a. He stopped his search, and let the others do their job. _Gone. Dead. They ran to the trap at my command, and fell pray to human tricks. I should have known. _Jul thought.

But he would not blame himself, there was only one he could blame- Catherine Halsey. "You, Unggoy. Make sure this mess is cleaned, repair the hull." Jul said. "Sangheili, come to me. Gather your troops and be prepared, this may not be the last attack. Make sure no one reaches the hangar, or enters a ship."

They ran off to their duties, and Jul remained. He watched silently as they uncovered the third body- another unknown. That made him feel

even more guilty. _I will find her, and I will kill her. With my bare hands, I will kill her, and I will send her head to the UNSC for safekeeping. _Jul decided. _And the Huragok... I will give it to the Jackals, let them make a meal from it. _Minutes passed, and Jul watched as the Unggoy carried pieces of shattered metal out for disposal. Soon enough, you could hardly tell what happened (if it weren't for the giant hole on top). It was then that it dawned on him- his honor guards were at his side, and no one was at his office. No one was protecting the Key.

He ran again, through purple shafts and tunnels, doors opening at his command. It took him far too long to reach his office again, and he was out of breath. Inside, the room looked empty, yet in a bad way- like a haunted temple, with ghosts ready to assault him at any moment. The key was missing- Jul cried with anger, punching the purple wall and denting the metal. "That little-

The ship's alarm sounded- fierce and loud. Lights flashed, and he heard shouts from outside his office. "What is this?" he shouted, to no one in particular. "What did she do now?"

A second explosion echoed in the distance, and the ship shook under him. His comms were now ablaze with chatter. "Enemy ship", "We're under attack", "Get to battle stations", "Fleetmaster, we need you at the bridge- now". It all came so quickly, so suddenly.

Jul walked to the bridge. A commotion was taking place around him, but he did not care- he walked. On the large screen he saw the UNSC Infinity, a smoldering ball of fire where half his fleet had been and the other half evading and shooting plasma bolts aimlessly. A swarm of Frigates, Broadwords and Longswords were charging at his fleet shredding his smaller ships to pieces. Multiple parts of his ship flashed red on the holoscreen, where the humans hit it. "What should we do, Fleetmaster? The Infinity has already taken down two carriers, and it will soon be upon us." they asked him. _It was her. She did this. _Jul realized.

"Stand your ground. Tell the other ships to escape if they can, to meet at the rendezvous point." Jul told them.

"Fleetmaster, this ship stands no chance against the Infinity's weapons. We should leave now." a Kig-Yar said.

"Do as I say, rodent." he told the creature, shutting him up. "They will come to us, and we will be prepared."

****CHAPTER 9****

_They will not destroy this ship. _Jul knew. _They will come, they will infiltrate it, but they will not destroy it. Not until Halsey is in their hands, not until they have the Key. _Or maybe he was lying to himself. _Maybe the Infinity would unleash a torrent of hellfire on us. _But then, they could never have escaped in time anyway. _It must be done, _he decided. _If the cowards won't do it, I will._

Jul climbed the step and let the exoskeletal shell latch itself to his naked back. _They will be here soon_, but this will only take a minute. The Huragok don't lie. _He closed his eyes and activated the machine with his hand (removing the setting for long-term sedatives- they did not have enough time for that). He was now covered in metal

clasps and plastic tubes. It began, and it hurt. He felt the first injection in his neck, the second at his back, and then he felt nothing- for a moment, a short moment. His eyes closed slowly and all he saw was black.

Dark dreams followed, and they were all plagued with a sense of growing pain. When he woke, ten minutes had passed.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" he screamed, as the pain took over him. The exoskeletal shell gave way and he fell on his hands. His knees shook, and spasms of pain flowed through his back and his arms and his legs. His head hurt most of all. When he looked down at his arms, they were monstrously deformed- huge, uneven, broken. He crawled to his mirror, against his body's wishes. _Pain is only there to make you afraid. I am Jul 'Mdama- pain means nothing to me._

He climbed to his feet and looked at his body in full form. _Ugly. Giant. Magnificent._

****Five fireteams boarded the ship**** simultaenously while the fleet was covering their backs. They blew a door out of the back of the ship and entered a service tunnel. They were as silent and invisible as shadows in the night. Their mission was clear- get the Key, get Halsey. Sarah Palmer had boarded Covenant ships before, but she had never felt this uneasy. _It's a trap, it must be._ she thought.

The Covenant mother-ship remained in place while all its fleet ran off or died. They attacked, but they did not run. Palmer knew that that did not bode well for her and her Spartans, but orders were orders. _We were told to prepare for a possible trap, but how can one prepare for something that is at its core a surprise?_ But it did not matter. Palmer would get the Key, and then she would take Halsey. _I should have aimed better, I should have gotten her the first time_.

But then, Halsey was the one to call them here- to tell them of the exact location of Jul 'Mdama and his fleet. _Maybe she's part of this trap._ she thought. Palmer could not see Halsey helping the UNSC. But Tom had higher hopes. He believed her, and he made sure that Palmer understood that she is not to kill Halsey. _What would ONI say? Would they just kill Halsey themselves when this is over?_ Palmer wondered.

They found their first kill- an unsuspecting Grunt- walking away from them in the purple metal tunnel. Her Spartans got him before she could even think of pulling the trigger. She was so proud of them, her Spartans. They were a force unparalleled by any, and they could cast fear even in the eyes of Forerunners. _If just one managed to defeat the Didact, what is this lot capable of?_

Before long, there were armies of them charging her. Grunts and Jackals and Elites- they killed them one by one, with never a scratch on their armors. They even ran past a Hunter, but Palmer preferred not to try and kill it because it would be too time-consuming. Blue blood splattered the walls of the ship, and more would follow suit. "Roland, where is 'Mdama's office?" Palmer asked in her comms.

"Just take a right here and enter the door in the center. If you happen to see the Fleetmaster, kill him, would you?" Roland asked.

"It will be my pleasure." she answered- and then something hit her. Her body flew back and she hit the floor on her side. Her ears rang, and she blinked hard to get her vision back to normal. She turned on her back, and saw the monstrosity: it was the biggest Elite she had ever seen- deformed and distorted, like a cartoon drawing. Its hands were huge and its muscles thick, its legs tall and bulky. The creature wore an assortment of parts, anything that fit and not full armor. Palmer aimed her pistols at it and shot, but the bullets bounced off its shields (which were apparently working even with the minimal armor).

The monster paid no mind to Palmer, instead it turned to her Spartans. It smacked Bravo 2 into the wall, and the Spartan's visor shattered and sprayed blood. "No!" Palmer shouted, struggling to get on her feet. The Elite activated a long, red Energy Sword- lighting the room in the color of blood. It slashed at Bravo 4, avoiding the torrent of Assault Rifle fire from the rest of her fireteam.

"Shit." Bravo 6 gasped as the sword impaled itself into Bravo 3's neck, gushing blood like a waterfall. The giant roared and laughed, grabbing Bravo 6 in his hands and throwing him into Bravo 5. They toppled to the ground, both trying helplessly to get up. The monster's foot stomped on them, maniacally and the sound of the visor shattering broke Palmer's heart. _My Spartans..._

Palmer rushed towards the monster- firing and firing and firing until her magazines were empty. The monster didn't care- it had its back to her and it kept stomping and stomping and _killing_. She threw the pistols away and unsheathed her knife shoving it with force into the creature's neck. Finally, it turned to her, smacking her onto the wall and holding her by the neck. "And who are you?" the creature said, in surprisingly accurate English.

Palmer could not answer, the Elite's grip was tight on her neck, and her kicks did not seem to hurt him. He let one hand off her neck and pulled at her helmet, removing it slowly. "Sarah Palmer..." he said. "Perfect."

She could not breathe. For a moment, she thought she was going to die here, in this ship, with her Spartans. The Elite let go of her and she fell to the floor grasping for air. The creature removed the knife from its neck and let purple blood stream down his nearly naked body, but it did not seem to mind the wound. It inhaled deeply, as if breathing in fresh air. "You were exactly who I was hoping for." he said.

Captain Lasky waited silently for a report. Five Spartans had died, and the rest found no sign of Halsey or the Key. Palmer was alive- the last of her fireteam- but she had not responded to them. He could imagine her lying there- unconscious. _She is a survivor. _he thought. _She will make it._

"Captain Lasky, we have an incoming call. It's from Palmer's helmet." Roland said.

"Answer it."

On his screen appeared a monstrous Elite, holding up Sarah's throat with the point of his knife. "So _this _is your Infinity? Less impressive from the inside." it said.

"Are you... Jul 'Mdama?" he asked, not believing his eyes.

"Call your demons back home, turn your ship around and leave this place- or your pet female will die." Jul said.

****CHAPTER 10****

****When the Infinity attacked, the ship went into absolute frenzy.**** They removed the lockdown instantly, and numerous fighters took off to counter the Broadwords and Longswords that were on the UNSC's vanguard. It was all just as Halsey expected.

She waited inside a Litch, ready to leave. "_Doctor Catherine Halsey, they are coming here._" Glides Low said. She held her Plasma Pistol up, aiming at the door. When it opened, A Sangheli and three Unggoy stepped in- unsuspecting. The plasma took the Elite in the face, melting the helmet on to his eyes. She had to kill one Grunt before the rest ran off- shooting it in the gas tank.

"_We should leave_. _There is little time._" Glides Low suggested as he pushed the bodies out of their ship, with an expression Halsey could only categorize as disgust.

"Let's go." Halsey said. The Litch rose up, levitating a meter above the ground floor, blue thrusters activating at its back. And then they were off- passing through the blue one-way shield and out into the empty space beyond. Around them, a battle was raging- Seraphs and Broadwords and Liches and Pelicans and Frigates and Cruisers. Blue plasma streaked across the blackness of space like rain, and silent explosions took apart ships in the distance. Far off, the UNSC Infinity stood in place- dwarfing all but Jul 'Mdama's flag-ship.

The battle was shrinking behind them, and soon it was gone. It was just Halsey and the Engineer in their Lich, the past behind them and the future looming ahead. "_Where shall we go?_" Glides Low asked enthusiastically. The idea of a Huragok overtaken by a sense of exploration made Halsey smile.

"Do you know the Absolute Record?" she asked him.

"_Yes._" he answered, a little reluctant.

"Where is it? Take me there." she said.

"_We can not go to the Absolute Record._ _But you should know that, you've already been there._" the Engineer said.

Halsey would not dwell on that now- first they must leave. _Humans want me dead on Earth and its colonies, the Covenant wants me dead... I will be a fugitive, no matter where I go._ Halsey thought, sadly. _Is there anywhere where I could truly be free? Anywhere in this galaxy? _Suddenly, Halsey knew where to go.

The slipspace portal opened up in a shade of black darker than space itself. They were going home.

End

file.